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Auditor General of British Columbia

Literacy:

Creating the Conditions for Reading and Writing Success

February 2008

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OFFICE OF THE
Auditor General
of British Columbia

LOCATION:
8 Bastion Square
Victoria, British Columbia
V8V 1X4

OFFICE HOURS:
Monday to Friday
8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

TELEPHONE:
250 387-6803
Toll free through Enquiry BC at: 1 800 663-7867
In Vancouver dial 660-2421

FAX: 250 387-1230

E-MAIL: bcauditor@bcauditor.com

WEBSITE:
This report and others are available at our Website, which also contains further information about the Office: www.bcauditor.com

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OFFICE OF THE
Auditor General
of British Columbia

8 Bastion Square
Victoria, British Columbia
Canada V8V 1X4
Telephone: 250 387-6803
Facsimile: 250 387-1230
Website: http://bcauditor.com

The Honourable Bill Barisoff
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Province of British Columbia
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, British Columbia
V8V 1X4

Dear Sir:

I have the honour to transmit herewith to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia my 2007/2008 Report 6: Literacy: Creating the Conditions for Reading and Writing Success.

John Doyle
Auditor General of British Columbia

Victoria, British Columbia
February 2008

copy: Mr. E. George MacMinn, Q.C.
Clerk of the Legislative Assembly

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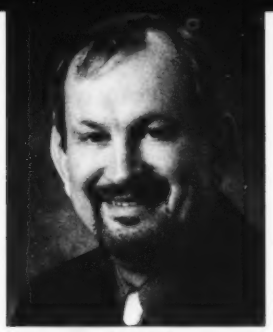
Auditor General's Comments



John Doyle
Auditor General

This report presents the results of my Office's audit of the province's progress with respect to one of the Government of British Columbia's "Five Great Goals": to make British Columbia the most literate jurisdiction in North America by 2015.

My predecessor chose to undertake this audit because all British Columbians have the right to develop the literacy and essential skills they need in order to participate fully in our social, cultural, economic and political life. Literacy is at the heart of learning. A commitment to learning throughout life leads to a society characterized by more literate, healthy and productive individuals, families, communities and workplaces.

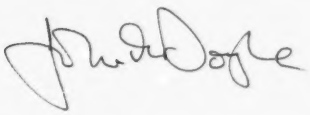
In this audit, we examined the efforts being made by the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education and a selection of school districts and post-secondary institutions to manage their literacy objectives.

Overall, we found that, while the government demonstrated some leadership in promoting literacy over the last few years, more needs to be done if it hopes to reach its literacy goal by 2015. In particular, the province's literacy framework should be supported by better information on the needs of literacy learners as well as an assessment and provision of the funding required to achieve the government's literacy goal. Improved monitoring and reporting is also needed to better assess progress and to make adjustments as necessary in order to achieve the goal.

If the concerns raised in my report are addressed, more literacy learners will take advantage of the services available to them because they will be more aware of the services. The services being offered will be tailored to meet local needs and will be properly funded. Results will be assessed regularly and service delivery will continuously improve, and the public and key stakeholders will be informed as to progress that is being made, both locally and provincially.

Auditor General's Comments

I would like to thank the staff of the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education and the school districts and post-secondary institutions we visited, for the cooperation and assistance they provided to my staff during their work on this audit.



John Doyle
Auditor General of British Columbia

Victoria, British Columbia
February 2008

Audit Team

Susan Jennings, Assistant Auditor General

Norma Glendinning, Director

Jean-Luc Tetreault, Project Leader

Amy Hart, Project Leader

Literacy—essentially, the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities—is fundamental to improving individuals' lives and a society's economic prosperity. A low literacy rate in any nation or jurisdiction is directly tied to higher rates of unemployment, low income and poor health.

British Columbia has long worked to increase literacy levels in the province, but the need for such training has become more important than ever in recent years. Like most other jurisdictions across North America, the province is facing growing competition for skilled workers nationally and internationally. With the economy burgeoning at the same time that school enrolments are declining and the workforce is aging, labour shortages are occurring in many occupations. If the government is to help British Columbians maintain their quality of life and stay economically competitive, then nurturing and promoting an educated workforce is vital.

In 2003, the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey found that British Columbia ranks among the top jurisdictions in Canada in literacy levels. However, the survey also found that about 40% of adult British Columbians had low English literacy skills (that is, difficulty in reading, writing and basic numeracy skills). Recognizing the need for improvement, the provincial government moved to make literacy one of its top priorities. In its 2006/07–2008/09 Strategic Plan, it set as one of its five main goals that of being *the most literate jurisdiction in North America by 2015.*

Audit Purpose and Scope

The purpose of our audit was to determine how well the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Advanced Education and a selection of school districts and public post-secondary institutions are planning and managing the province's efforts to reach its literacy goal. Specifically, we assessed whether:

- the efforts of government and key stakeholders to deliver and promote literacy services are coordinated effectively;
- a provincial strategic framework for literacy is in place, one based on sufficient data and information;

- the school districts and post-secondary institutions have developed their own plans, and whether these plans are consistent with the provincial strategic framework (i.e., government's direction) and respond to stakeholders' needs; and
- the ministries, school districts and post-secondary institutions are all regularly monitoring and reporting publicly on their progress and performance in delivering literacy services.

Included in our audit were the two ministries—Education (the provincial lead for literacy) and Advanced Education (responsible for adult literacy)—as well as four school districts (Prince George, Kamloops-Thompson, Vancouver and Campbell River) and four post-secondary institutions (College of New Caledonia, Thompson Rivers University, Vancouver Community College and North Island College). In choosing our school districts and institutions, we considered type of student population served and looked for a mix of city and rural representation. Our selection was for illustrative purposes only and not meant to be statistically representative.

The period we were interested in primarily was that beginning in the summer of 2005, when the Ministry of Education was assigned the lead agency role in literacy. We began the audit in the summer of 2006 by visiting with the selected school districts and institutions. We then focused our efforts on the ministries involved in literacy and completed our work in July 2007. Our examination was performed in accordance with assurance standards established by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.

The scope for this audit was risk-based. Because literacy covers a wide area, we focused on some of its critical components (that is, kindergarten to Grade 12 and adult literacy training). We did not look at: the results to date of the government's efforts concerning early learning, Aboriginal students, special education students, education standards, trainer's capacity to provide literacy instruction, or support for literacy learners.

Finally, we directed our findings and recommendations at the Ministry of Education and Boards of Education (previously called school boards) because they are the lead coordinators, respectively, for provincial and local literacy efforts.

Executive Summary

Audit Conclusion

We concluded that the government has demonstrated some leadership in promoting literacy over the last few years by developing a province-wide strategy. However, while it has also provided some funding, the actual cost of implementing its strategy is still unknown. It has made progress in encouraging better coordination and collaboration amongst key stakeholders, but more needs to be done if the literacy goal is to be reached by 2015. For example:

- More could be done to reach out to potential literacy learners (such as through an awareness campaign) to encourage them to take advantage of the services available to them.
- The literacy strategic framework should be better supported with data, cost information, funding options and detailed implementation plans.
- Monitoring and performance reporting should be improved so that progress can be tracked accurately and meaningfully and so that adjustments can be made to strategies as necessary to meet objectives.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Coordination has been challenging, but progress is being made

A structure is currently in place to coordinate the 10 ministries involved in planning literacy services. Since 2005, progress has been made in getting the ministries to work together collaboratively and productively, but additional steps are needed. For example, the ministries need to work together to develop a more seamless process for improving literacy levels of English-as-a-second-language learners, and to implement the province's adult literacy strategy (outlined in the Adult Opportunities Action Plan).

At the local level, the involvement of communities in delivering literacy programs is known to be of paramount importance. We found that at the time we visited the school districts and post-secondary institutions, the government had not yet defined what that role should be, and no organization had been made responsible for coordinating efforts at this level. However, the province's recent decision to make local school boards (now called

Boards of Education) responsible for leading the development of literacy plans at the community level should, it is hoped, change this situation.

Literacy services are already available in the various communities in British Columbia, but there is no province-wide awareness campaign or a locally based "one-window" delivery approach (providing learners with one place to access information on all the literacy programs available in their community). Two tools — a 1-800 phone number and a website — are good general steps for providing information on the services available, but we believe that a more community-based approach should be considered once roles and responsibilities are better clarified.

We recommend that the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Advanced Education, Boards of Education and post-secondary institutions work together to develop ways of encouraging greater use of literacy services, such as through awareness campaigns on literacy and "one-window" approaches to delivering information on literacy at both the provincial and local levels.

Strategic planning for literacy services lacks the support of adequate data and information

Although the government declared in its 2004 Throne Speech its commitment to improving literacy, it did not ask the Ministry of Education to develop a strategic framework until the summer of 2005. The ministry then spent the next 18 months leading the development of this framework.

We found that the overall framework announced by the government in 2007 was reasonable but lacked several key elements. For instance, despite the frequent recent calls by various advocacy groups and government officials for additional and more sustainable funding for literacy, the ministry did not identify what each proposed strategy option would cost to implement, or provide a consideration of the funding options. Also, the proposed framework was not supported by sufficient data on the needs of the population groups being targeted for literacy improvements (e.g., Aboriginal, immigrant and socio-economically disadvantaged) or by detailed implementation plans.

We recommend that the Ministry of Education develop implementation plans that are supported by more comprehensive data and information on the needs of the populations it is targeting and on costing information for each of its strategies to improve literacy.

As well, in the absence of government direction (e.g., in defining what it meant by literacy), the school districts and schools we visited had developed plans based on their own definitions. This has contributed to a piecemeal approach to literacy in the province. However, the recently revised accountability framework (as outlined in the School Act) includes a definition for literacy and a requirement that the Boards of Education consult with community partners in developing community literacy plans.

If the boards fully engage key stakeholders within their communities (such as post-secondary institutions and Aboriginal organizations) and if the ministry provides appropriate supports (such as resources and guidance), this should, over time, help to create a more cohesive approach to literacy at the local level.

We recommend that the:

- **Ministry of Education:**
  - **provide appropriate support (such as guidance and resources) to the Boards of Education in the development of their literacy plans and reports; and**
  - **monitor implementation of the revised accountability framework and assess the effectiveness of the framework with respect to the focus on literacy.**
- **Boards of Education develop their literacy plans:**
  - **in the context of the provincial strategic framework; and**
  - **in consultation with key organizations within their local communities to determine needs and preferred strategies for addressing those needs.**

Monitoring and performance reporting are currently insufficient to enable meaningful tracking and accounting of progress

Overall, monitoring and reporting on progress needs to be improved at all three levels: by the province overall; by each ministry involved; and by each school district and institution. Currently, the government does not have sufficient data to monitor

progress for the population groups it is targeting in its literacy strategy (English-as-a-Second-Language, Aboriginal and basic literacy learners). It also lacks a good method for monitoring its progress in implementing its adult literacy strategies. While the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (conducted every 10 years or so) provides good information on progress, the survey does not occur frequently enough to enable the government to make timely adjustments to strategies that may not be working.

Furthermore, while there is some performance reporting at the ministry level, little occurs province-wide or at the local level by school district and post-secondary institution. Although the government's revised accountability framework requires the Boards of Education to produce annual literacy plans, it does not require them to report on the progress being made in implementing these plans.

We recommend that:

- **the Ministry of Education ensure that monitoring and reporting at all levels—provincial, ministry and community—be aligned with evidence-based, qualitative and quantitative performance measures;**
- **the Boards of Education work with the key stakeholders within their communities to: 1) measure progress and adjust strategies as necessary to meet local needs; and 2) report annually on the progress they make within their communities in achieving the literacy objectives identified in the community literacy plans; and**
- **the government issue a province-wide annual public report on its progress in achieving its literacy goals and objectives.**

Detailed Report

Why should we care about literacy levels in the province?

Someone who has difficulty reading and writing is at a major disadvantage in life. As was stated in the provincial Throne Speech in February 2004, "Many adults ... cannot fill out job applications, read a map, use an ATM machine or balance a chequebook." Literacy gives people personal empowerment, greater work opportunities and the ability to participate actively and positively in the local and global social community. Literacy also gives people a strong foundation for basic education and lifelong learning.

What is meant by "literacy"?

There is no consensus even in the field of literacy about how the term should be defined. This is problematic because, as the Canadian Council on Learning has stated, "the way the word is defined determines what gets identified as a literacy issue, how policies are devised to respond to those issues, how programs are designed to implement policy and which indicators are used to measure results." Thus, before any jurisdiction can measure its progress in achieving literacy-related goals, it must first specify what literacy means.

In British Columbia, Literacy BC (a not-for-profit organization that promotes and supports literacy and learning) concluded from a province-wide consultation that the meaning of literacy and learning varies according to the context: "Each individual and each constituency group sees it differently – from the standpoint of their own situation and interests." In other words, some see it as referring to basic literacy (reading and writing), while others broaden the definition to encompass functional literacy or even concepts that extend well beyond reading and writing—computer literacy, for example.

The Ministry of Education recently adopted the following definition: "Literacy is the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community." The ministry used as its basis for this definition the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (2003) definition for literacy.[1]

[1] 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS). The survey is an international comparative study that measures the literacy and numeracy skills of a nationally and provincially representative sample of participants, 16-65 years of age. It is the result of a joint effort among Statistics Canada, Human Resources and Social Development Canada, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Background

One of the main findings of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) conducted in British Columbia in 2003 was that British Columbians with lower levels of literacy have lower rates of employment and lower earnings. Other studies conclude that improving literacy levels leads to less dependence on government support and to a reduction in health costs. According to a study by the American Medical Association, for instance, the average health care costs among individuals with low literacy skills were more than four times higher than among the general population.

In a global economy, a highly skilled population is also a critical asset and essential to economic growth. Research conducted by the Canadian Council on Learning suggests that demand between 1991 and 2003 for a better skilled labour force rose substantially. During that period, the number of high-knowledge businesses increased by 78% and of medium-knowledge by 14%. The number of low-knowledge businesses fell by 3%. At the same time, the workforce in British Columbia is aging and school enrolments are declining, causing an ever increasing shortage in many occupations.

Clearly then, an investment in literacy offers significant returns. According to experts, raising literacy scores by 1% relative to the international average may translate into an eventual 2.5% rise in labour productivity.

British Columbia's literacy levels are comparatively high, but some weaknesses exist

According to various international literacy assessments, British Columbia's literacy rates are among the best in Canada and North America. On average, British Columbia performs well in relation to several recognized literacy indicators. For example:

- Seventy-five percent of British Columbia children enter school ready to learn in the five areas measured by the Early Development Instrument: physical well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development and communication and general knowledge.
- British Columbia students currently rank in the top three in the world in reading, math and science based on an international literacy assessment focusing on 15-year-olds (Programme for International Student Assessment).

- Seventy-nine percent of British Columbia students are completing secondary school within six years of starting Grade 8 in a public or independent school.[2]
- British Columbia adult literacy levels are among the highest in Canada, with 60% of adults having the knowledge or skills to locate and use written basic information effectively in the information society and in the workplace.[3]

That said, the above results also clearly indicate several challenges:

- Twenty-five percent of British Columbia's children are, when they enter school, developmentally vulnerable, which significantly affects their ability to learn.
- Over 20% of British Columbia students are not completing high school within six years of starting Grade 8.[4]
- Forty percent of British Columbia adults do not have the knowledge or skills to locate and use basic written information effectively in English in everyday work and life. Between the first IALSS done in 1994 and the second one done in 2003, little progress was made.

Within the population at large, there are also particular groups who experience additional challenges:

The immigrant population — British Columbia received 44,734 new immigrants in 2005. Of those over 15 years of age, 14,488 arrived without adequate ability in either official language. Although many new immigrants are highly literate in their native language, their limited ability to read in English prevents them from becoming fully integrated, socially and economically contributing members of the community.

The Aboriginal population — This population, which is growing at a faster rate than the rest of the provincial population, has low levels of literacy. The non-completion rate for Aboriginal high school students, 53%, is substantially higher than for non-Aboriginals, potentially impacting their future socio-economic status.

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[2] Since some students go back to complete high school as adults, this percentage likely understates the total percentage of British Columbians who have completed their high school.

[3] International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS), 2003.

[4] Since some students go back to complete high school as adults, this percentage likely overstates the total percentage of British Columbians who have not completed their high school.

Both of these groups—the immigrant and Aboriginal populations—are very important to British Columbia's future economic growth. Immigrants, for example, are expected to fill approximately one-third of all job openings between now and 2014. Ensuring these groups develop the ability to read and use written English is therefore vital.

But economic competitiveness is not the only imperative. Literacy is very much about the quality of life of individuals; their ability to function on a daily basis, to integrate within their communities and to be fully contributing members of society.

Learning and Literacy Among British Columbia's Aboriginal Students

The Aboriginal population in British Columbia is relatively young, with fully half under the age of 25. Aboriginal people will therefore soon account for a growing proportion of citizens entering post-secondary education and the workforce.

Significant changes have reshaped the demographics of the Aboriginal school population since 1988. During the last decade alone (1996/97 to 2005/06), the number of Aboriginal students in British Columbia's public schools rose by 50% from 38,084 to 57,227—this at a time when school enrolment is declining. Aboriginal students now make up 10% or more of school populations in many school districts.

At the same time, despite the introduction of a series of initiatives to encourage and support their educational achievement, school completion rates for Aboriginal students remain below 50% (compared with 79% for the general student population).

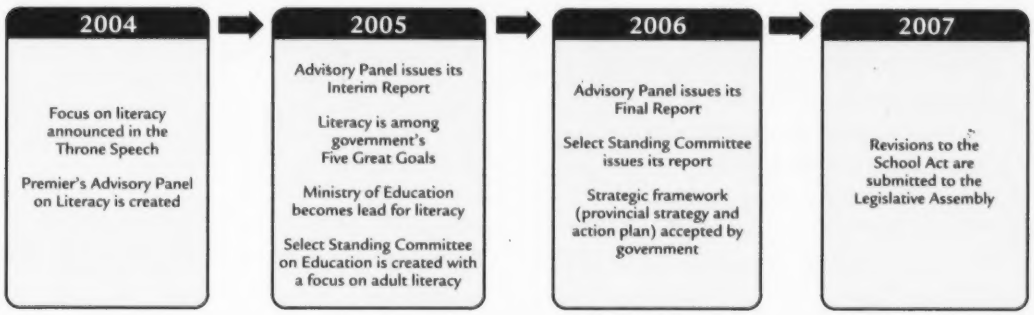
These figures are cause for concern. We highlight them here because of the link between school completion rates and literacy rates. More importantly, however, is the fact that education and literacy directly affect the quality of life of individuals and the society in which they live.

The British Columbia government has been proactive in making literacy a priority

Although British Columbia has been providing literacy training for many years, it was not until 2004 that the government highlighted it as a key priority. Since then, the province has taken several steps in support of improving literacy, including creating an advisory panel, convening a committee of the Legislative Assembly, developing a strategic framework and amending legislation. The key milestones are set out in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1

British Columbia's actions on literacy since 2004


2004
Focus on literacy announced in the Throne Speech
Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy is created
2005
Advisory Panel issues its Interim Report
Literacy is among government's Five Great Goals
Ministry of Education becomes lead for literacy
Select Standing Committee on Education is created with a focus on adult literacy
2006
Advisory Panel issues its Final Report
Select Standing Committee issues its report
Strategic framework (provincial strategy and action plan) accepted by government
2007
Revisions to the School Act are submitted to the Legislative Assembly

Source: Created by the Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia.

In its 2004 Throne Speech, the provincial government stated that it wanted British Columbia to be "recognized as the most literate location in North America by 2010." (The proposed timeline was later raised to 2015.) It also committed to creating a Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy, whose focus was to assess British Columbia's most urgent needs in literacy and to recommend actions for improvement.

The advisory panel's Interim Report, submitted February 2005, highlighted two key issues for government's consideration:

- A "**Services Gap**": Literacy services and programs rely on numerous agencies and multiple funding sources. As a result, there is a lack of coordination and consistency (in service delivery), inadequate and unstable funding, and gaps in service provision.
- A "**Knowing-Doing Gap**": Considerable research, knowledge, and best practice information exists on literacy development and lifelong learning for people of different age groups and of diverse backgrounds, and for individuals facing unique challenges. According to the panel, however, although the government knows what should happen, it was not following through with action.

For British Columbia to succeed in becoming the most literate jurisdiction on the continent, the province must, said the advisory panel, address these issues in a provincial literacy plan.

Background

In 2005, the government made literacy one of its "Five Great Goals" and included it in the provincial Strategic Plan 2006/07-2008/09. The government committed to actions such as:

- developing a comprehensive Early Years Strategy to help children enter school "ready to learn";
- ensuring British Columbians (students and adults) have high levels of literacy and are attaining the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to compete in today's global economy and society; and
- closing the gap in literacy and educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal British Columbians.

Also, in June 2005, the Ministry of Education was given the lead responsibility for literacy, which included coordinating provincial efforts and developing the provincial strategy for literacy.

In November 2005, the Legislative Assembly created the Select Standing Committee on Education and assigned it a focus "to examine, inquire, and make recommendations with respect to:

- finding effective strategies to address the specific challenge of adult literacy and, in particular, to conduct consultations to consider successful strategies from other jurisdictions on the promotion of adult literacy; and
- considering specific strategies to improve literacy rates among Aboriginal people, English-as-a-second-language adults and seniors."

The committee submitted its report to the Legislative Assembly in November 2006 with a number of recommendations, including the creation of a single secretariat to coordinate the activities of the various ministries involved with literacy policy-making and programming.

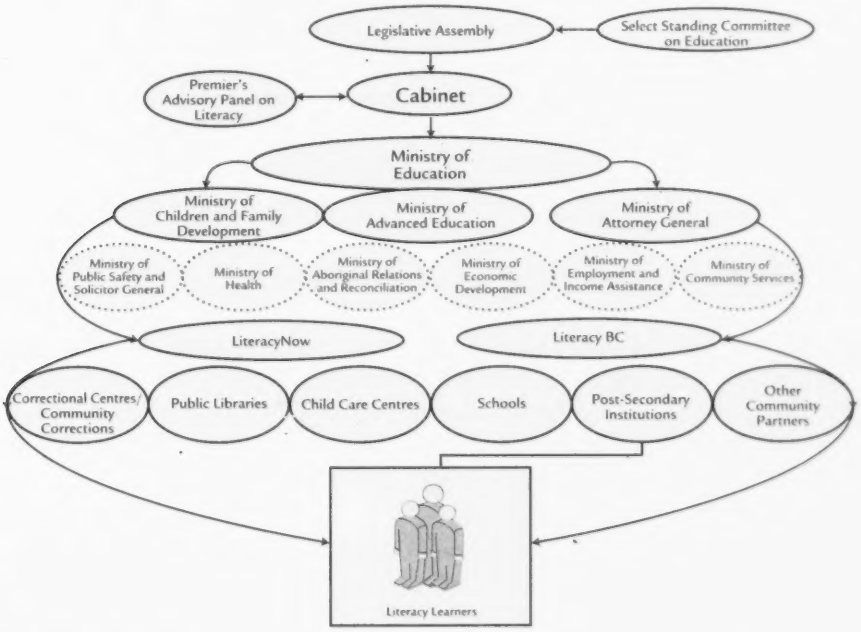
In 2006/07, the government announced the strategic framework for literacy. In developing this framework, the Ministry of Education had: sought revisions to the School Act to update the planning (including that for literacy) and reporting processes at school districts; outlined British Columbia's strategy for literacy; and provided targets and an action plan for literacy.

The province's literacy service delivery system involves many stakeholders and the costs are unknown

The Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy recommended that literacy services be delivered through a lifelong learning approach, for children (birth to Grade 3) and youth (Grades 4-12) right through to adults. Currently, these services are being provided at a variety of venues, including child care centres, schools, post-secondary institutions, community partners' facilities and work sites. Because of this, numerous agencies have an interest and involvement in delivering literacy services: 10 ministries, 60 school districts, 26 post-secondary institutions (including BCcampus, the province's online learning agency), and a host of non-profit agencies, regional literacy coordinators and other community partners (see Exhibit 2). This number of players greatly increases the complexity of the system.

Exhibit 2

Key organizations involved in overseeing or delivering literacy services in British Columbia



Source: Created by the Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia.

While Cabinet is responsible for providing direction, it is up to the ministries to ensure that direction is carried out. To this end, ministries plan, monitor and report on literacy based on their respective roles and responsibilities. Ten ministries are involved in overseeing literacy services in British Columbia:

- The **Ministry of Education** is responsible for children in the K-12 system. In 2005 the ministry was also given the lead role in coordinating literacy in British Columbia. Its mandate was expanded to include responsibility for literacy, early childhood and public libraries. In fulfilling this role, it relies heavily on the cooperation of other organizations.
- The **Ministry of Advanced Education** is responsible for adult literacy, including the delivery of literacy services and programs within the Community Adult Literacy Program. Under this program, the public post-secondary institutions partner with non-governmental organizations to deliver literacy services at the local community level.
- The **Ministry of Children and Family Development** delivers a few family literacy-related programs.
- The **Ministry of Attorney General** is largely responsible for basic English language training for immigrants, including learners who have low literacy in their original language.
- The **Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General** is responsible for providing adult basic education programs within correctional facilities.
- The **Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance** purchases programs of an English-as-a-second-language, literacy and adult basic education nature that are delivered through a third party.
- The **Ministry of Economic Development** manages the Skills Connect program for immigrants, which focuses on English language training for foreign-trained professionals and trades people.
- The **Ministry of Health**, **Ministry of Community Services** and **Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation** provide guidance on various literacy matters to British Columbians.

Background

School districts, schools and post-secondary institutions directly deliver training services to literacy learners and accordingly do their own planning, monitoring and reporting.

Two main agencies play a provincial role: Literacy BC and LiteracyNow. Literacy BC, a not-for-profit literacy organization established in 1990, promotes and supports literacy and learning in British Columbia. It receives funding from the province, the federal government and corporations and individuals. LiteracyNow was established by the provincial government in 2004 as a not-for-profit agency under the 2010 LegaciesNow umbrella. It has a community development strategy that encourages collaborative planning for literacy success. Grants are provided to communities and regions to fund the creation or expansion of literacy programs identified during the community planning process.

In some areas, Regional Literacy Coordinators develop adult literacy opportunities by helping colleges and community literacy organizations partner to provide literacy services, often at the fundamental level of literacy and numeracy. As well, the coordinators facilitate the development of family literacy and workplace literacy projects and provide literacy practitioners training within their regions.

Community partners also directly deliver literacy services at the local level. Training is provided through, for example, individual tutoring, small group activities, and family literacy activities.

No one really knows what is currently being spent on literacy programs in British Columbia. For the last few years, the province has provided funding allocations to school districts and post-secondary institutions under a block funding approach (meaning a set amount of money based on the number of enrolled students), and it has not tracked how much is being spent on literacy programs. We estimate that together the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Advanced Education spent roughly $137 million on literacy-related programs for the 2006/07 period (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3

Estimated funding provided for literacy-related programs in 2006/07

Ministry of Education[a]		**millions $**
Adult graduation programs (Continuing Education)		35.0
Community-based literacy initiatives:		7.1
LiteracyNow	5.0	
Literacy BC	1.2	
BC Association of Friendship Centres	0.5	
BC's Raise-a-Reader Campaign	0.4	
Subtotal	7.1	
StrongStart centres (family literacy)		5.0
Literacy Innovation Grants (for literacy-related pilot projects)		5.0
Public libraries		4.0
Ready Set Learn (kindergarten readiness program)		3.0
Ministry of Advanced Education		
Adult Basic Education[b]		56.0
English as a Second Language – literacy level		8.0
Adult Special Education		8.0
Community Adult Literacy Program (CALP)[c]		1.4
Adult Basic Education Student Assistance Program		5.0
Total		**137.5**

[a] The Ministry of Education estimate does not include funding allocated by the various school districts to literacy-related programs in their respective communities.

[b] This amount includes funding for the advanced and provincial levels of adult basic education which does not necessarily focus on literacy students.

[c] CALP will be increased by $1 million starting in 2007/08.

Source: Compiled by the Office of the Auditor General from unaudited Ministry of Education and Ministry of Advanced Education data.

Our expectations

The provincial government has a clearly defined goal: make British Columbia the most literate jurisdiction in North America by 2015. Virtually every report written on literacy in the province over the past 15 years has called for coordination of literacy strategies across ministerial as well as governmental boundaries. We therefore wanted to assess the steps taken by the Ministry of Education

and Ministry of Advanced Education, Boards of Education and post-secondary education institutions to coordinate, plan, monitor and report on literacy. Our three main expectations, worded as questions, included the following:

- How effectively have province-wide and local efforts been coordinated to meet literacy objectives?
- Is a provincial strategic framework for literacy in place, one based on good information?
- How effectively is government monitoring and reporting on its performance and progress in achieving its literacy objectives?

How effectively have province-wide and local efforts been coordinated to meet literacy objectives?

With so many organizations involved in literacy in the province, it is critical that an effective coordination infrastructure be in place. Without good coordination, the risk is that duplication or gaps will result in the delivery of literacy-related programs across the province. For the government to succeed with this important priority, we therefore expected it to have established effective coordination mechanisms such as:

- clear and agreed-upon definitions, roles and accountabilities;
- effective consultation processes to solicit advice from stakeholders; and
- well-functioning committee structures.

As well, given that studies have found that enrolment by adults in literacy training programs is typically low, we expected that the government would address this challenge.

We concluded that some coordination mechanisms are in place at the provincial level and progress has been made. Further improvements are planned, such as establishing a seamless process (coverage of a spectrum of students from an holistic point of view) for working with English-as-a-second-language learners and following-up on the Adult Opportunities Action Plan (the adult literacy strategy).

At the time of our examination no agency had been assigned lead responsibility for coordinating efforts at the local level. As a result, programs and delivery varied from community to community. Recent amendments to the School Act are intended to change this as Boards of Education (called school boards prior to the new legislation) take on the responsibility for developing literacy plans at the community level.

Still lacking are a province-wide campaign on literacy to increase awareness of literacy and services available, and a locally developed "one-window" approach to literacy services.

How effectively have province-wide and local efforts been coordinated to meet literacy objectives?

Coordination and collaboration efforts need continued focus

Coordination across ministries

Following the Premier's commitment to make British Columbia the best educated and most literate jurisdiction on the continent, the Ministry of Education was given the lead in furthering provincial literacy "from cradle to grave."

The recommendation of the Premier's Advisory Panel concerning the need for a provincial strategic framework for literacy was directed to the Ministry of Education. The other ministries involved were responsible for ensuring their own strategies aligned with the province's goals and objectives. The Ministry of Advanced Education, for example, was to continue to lead the adult literacy agenda.

To develop this strategic framework for literacy, the Ministry of Education consulted, coordinated and collaborated with the many other ministries and organizations involved in overseeing or delivering literacy services in the province (see Exhibit 2). Various committees and structures helped to do this, but key among them were the following two:

- The Inter-ministerial Literacy Committee, led by the Ministry of Education and made up of middle managers from the 10 ministries involved, was to provide an information exchange forum on literacy for the ministries.
- The Deputy Ministers' Committee of Social Ministries played a vetting role for various initiatives emanating from the Inter-ministerial Literacy Committee. It reviewed and commented on the Ministry of Education's literacy plans before they were presented to the government.

There have been some challenges—such as clarifying roles and strategies, getting all the players to meet regularly, and working together collaboratively—but the Inter-ministerial Literacy Committee made progress. Among its outputs were an inventory of provincial literacy programs and identification of literacy policy barriers. Nonetheless, there is still much to do to build a cohesive approach across ministries to improve literacy. One particular challenge, we noted, is that funding and priorities for English as a second language (ESL) are shared among four different ministries:

How effectively have province-wide and local efforts been coordinated to meet literacy objectives?

Education, Attorney General, Advanced Education and Economic Development. If a seamless process for ESL learners is to be created, these ministries need to work together to determine requirements and priorities. This has begun to happen, but much work remains to be done.

Community coordination

At the local level, the role of communities in the coordination and provision of literacy programs is paramount. Communities include schools, post-secondary institutions, libraries, community organizations, businesses and residents. These partners share expertise, administration and responsibility for literacy projects and provide the day-to-day literacy services for local learners. We found, however, that at the time we visited the school districts and post-secondary institutions, no one agency or stakeholder group had been made responsible for ensuring coordination at this level. In some communities (such as Campbell River), efforts of particular individuals have resulted in more coordinated efforts. Overall, though, the lack of clear authority or a structure means that literacy has generally been delivered in a piecemeal manner across British Columbia.

This situation may change with the province's recent move to make each local Board of Education responsible for coordinating literacy within their communities. These boards are also now responsible for annually submitting a literacy plan for their district to the Ministry of Education. To do this, the boards must invite comments from those within their community who are interested. In practice this means that boards will need to consult and collaborate with key stakeholders such as post-secondary institutions, libraries, Aboriginal organizations, LiteracyNow (a community-based planning body) and other community organizations. This is a significant change, and the effectiveness of it will need to be closely monitored by the Ministry of Education.

Better outreach to literacy learners is needed

Given that studies have shown that only a small fraction of eligible adults ever enroll in literacy or skills upgrading programs, we expected the government to have addressed this challenge. Two possible ways of doing so are by: 1) raising awareness of

literacy through a province-wide campaign; and 2) offering people a single point of access in their communities to information on literacy programs and services (that is, a "one-window" approach).

At the time of our audit, we found that neither an awareness campaign nor a local "one-window" approach for literacy had been established. Since then, however, we have learned that the government has developed plans to increase awareness. We also recognize that government's establishing of a provincial 1-800 phone number and website for literacy learners are good steps towards achieving a "one-window" approach, but, in our view, more local points of access are also necessary.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Advanced Education, Boards of Education and post-secondary institutions work together to develop ways of encouraging greater use of literacy services, such as through awareness campaigns on literacy and "one-window" approaches to delivering information on literacy at both the provincial and local levels.

Is a provincial strategic framework for literacy in place, one based on good information?

A comprehensive, well-thought-out strategy for improving literacy levels throughout the province is necessary if British Columbia is to reach its target by 2015.

The Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy recommended that a strategic framework for literacy be created, to cover both the work of all of the ministries involved in literacy and the work of the many and diverse delivery agencies in place across the province. We expected the Ministry of Education, as the lead for literacy, to have taken the following steps in consultation with the Ministry of Advanced Education and other ministries and stakeholders:

- provide advice, based on good data and information, on possible policy directions and funding options to the government for decision;
- establish and clearly communicate strategic direction—goals, performance measures/targets and suggested strategies—to school districts and post-secondary institutions; and
- establish detailed implementation plans, including cost and timeline estimates.

We found that although the Ministry of Education did give the government a proposal for a strategic framework for literacy, the ministry did not back this up with sufficient data about the needs of the target groups. Also missing was proper costing, funding options and detailed implementation plans.

We also learned that the Ministry of Advanced Education developed an Adult Opportunities Action Plan that is meant to align with the broader strategies put forth by the Ministry of Education. However, we did not assess the plan because it was not completed before the end of our audit.

Because literacy services are delivered in communities, the government's goal can only be met if all school districts, schools and post-secondary education institutions are aligned towards achieving the same goal. They also need to develop their individual literacy plans within the context of the provincial strategic framework. We therefore expected these plans to include for each school district or institution:

- a vision, mission, values, mandate and information on the opportunities for improving literacy and the challenges to doing so;

Is a provincial strategic framework for literacy in place, one based on good information?

- the objectives, strategies and actions planned for each literacy goal; and
- performance measures and targets, including how they will be monitored and evaluated.

We reviewed the literacy efforts of four school districts and four post-secondary institutions. We concluded that, despite the lack of a common definition for literacy, some planning for literacy was occurring in the school districts and less so in the post-secondary education institutions.

Better use of data and information is needed to support strategic planning

In response to the Advisory Panel's recommendation, the government developed the strategic framework for literacy through an inter-ministerial effort led by the Ministry of Education. However, it took almost three years to bring this framework to fruition. The original target, for "British Columbia to become recognized as the most literate location in North America by 2010," was announced in the Throne Speech in February 2004. The framework for literacy was not announced until January 2007—and in 2006, the target date was adjusted to 2015.[5]

Developing the strategic framework for literacy for the province

The literacy framework consists of two main components: the provincial strategy and the action plan.

The goal behind the provincial strategy is to address the continuum of literacy issues from early childhood through to adulthood. The ministry was inspired by Literacy BC's 2002 province-wide consultative paper, *The Big Picture Up Close: Literacy and Learning in BC*. Ministry staff also reviewed the Advisory Panel's 2005 Interim Report and 2006 Final Report and used input from members of the Inter-ministerial Literacy Committee and from the Deputy Ministers' Committee of Social Ministries.

[5] Province of British Columbia Strategic Plan 2006/07-2008/09.

Is a provincial strategic framework for literacy in place, one based on good information?

The Ministry of Education also developed an action plan for literacy called ReadNowBC. The plan focuses on more specific strategies for closing the literacy gap for particular population groups—notably, Aboriginal people, immigrants and the socio-economically disadvantaged.

To help support the implementation of the strategic framework, the ministry also sought changes to the School Act (described in detail in the next section).

In assessing the strategic framework, we found several strengths. For example, the framework:

- identified risks and issues;
- set literacy objectives and offered options and recommendations that sought community solutions and supported learning communities; and
- promoted the coordination of literacy efforts through the development of community literacy plans.

However, we also found two significant gaps:

- Despite frequent calls for additional and sustainable funding for literacy from government officials and various advocacy groups over the years (see sidebar), the Ministry of Education did not identify any cost data or funding options. If strategies are to be successfully implemented, they need to be adequately supported by funding. The government needs to know what it will cost to implement its strategies so that it can determine whether and how to fund them.

  We were told that the ministries were asked not to request more funding for the 2006/07 fiscal year, but to work within their current funding envelope. Nevertheless, we still expected the ministries to inform the government of the cost of the strategies being presented and of how those costs would be funded within the existing funding envelope. This analysis has not been done.
- The framework contained no quantified data about each of the target groups (Aboriginal people, immigrants, socio-economically disadvantaged) nor were there any details on the respective needs of those groups (such as level of services and resources required based on assessments). Such a lack of information limits development of options for actions and decisions, especially related to the strategies presented in the action plan for literacy. We think that the government requires more data to approve a strategy for literacy.

Is a provincial strategic framework for literacy in place, one based on good information?

The Call for Sustainable Funding for Literacy

"The goal of becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent will not happen without significantly increased and ongoing investments ..." (Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy).

Stakeholders frequently advocate for the investment of additional or more sustainable funds for literacy. In recent years, much of the funding that has been provided for literacy has been based on annual, one-time grants rather than on longer-term and more sustainable funding. For example, the Ministry of Education provides about $5 million each year in "Literacy Innovation Grants" to school districts. To attain this funding, school districts submit proposals for literacy projects. There is no guarantee of more funding in the following year. Funding provided by agencies such as LiteracyNow are similarly based on annual proposals.

The BC Progress Board—a provincial think-tank mandated by the Premier to provide strategic advice on a range of issues—recently concluded that "either additional funding or re-allocated funding is needed if the government is to make a concerted effort to promote and provide pre-school education programs ... to provide more detailed assessments and tailored programs for 'at risk' students."

The Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy also recommended that additional funds be invested for literacy "in addition to the current Provincial government investment in literacy."

The Select Standing Committee on Education, which consulted with various stakeholders concerning adult education, heard testimonies in favour of additional and more sustained funding for literacy. For instance, senior staff from the Ministry of Education stated that the ministry would work towards providing more funding for literacy. Representatives from the Ministry of Advanced Education recommended that government "develop a strategy with adequate sustainable funding." As well, staff of the LiteracyNow program recommended that the government "support some kind of infrastructure for carrying the work forward in a sustained way and for not looking at year-by-year funding."

While many people support long-term, sustainable funding to achieve the government's literacy goal, we believe a good first step would be for the government to first determine what strategies it should employ and how much they will cost.

Implementing the strategic framework for literacy

We expected the ministry, having developed its strategic framework and action plan for literacy, to then have overseen development of detailed implementation plans with timelines and costs. Instead, we found that the various ministries responsible for providing literacy services are still in the process of drawing up these plans. Much work remains to be completed, such as removing administrative and policy barriers that limit access to literacy programs (e.g., the need for sustainable funding and easy-to-find information on literacy services). We found that, without these detailed implementation plans, some ministries are not sure how

they will improve literacy rates for key populations (such as the kindergarten to Grade 12 students and Aboriginals) or what it will cost them to do so.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Ministry of Education develop implementation plans that are supported by more comprehensive data and information on the needs of the populations it is targeting and on costing information for each of its strategies to improve literacy.

Planning at the school district/school and institution level

In reviewing the literacy efforts of four school districts and four post-secondary institutions we found that planning was taking place at various levels. However, because of a lack of direction from the government—such as no common definition for literacy—each of the school districts we visited was having to develop its accountability contracts (plans) based on its own individual definition for literacy. In the school districts we reviewed this led to the use of a variety of literacy definitions, from the narrow "ability to read and write" to the broader "success for all." Literacy goals developed under these plans are directly influenced by these definitions.

Lack of a single province-wide definition for literacy has been, we believe, a significant contributor to the piecemeal approach to literacy in British Columbia.

We also noted that annual service plans and public reports drafted at the post-secondary level contain little information related to literacy. Performance information is limited to enrolment numbers in developmental programs.

In a more positive vein, we did note promising practices in literacy training being proposed at some of the school districts and post-secondary education institutions we reviewed. A summary of these practices is set out in Appendix A.

Since our audit, the government has introduced significant changes to the School Act that will affect the way school districts will be planning, managing and reporting on their objectives, including literacy (see sidebar). Given the significance of this shift, we think it will be important for the ministry to monitor the implementation of the revised accountability framework to ensure it is achieving what it is intended to do.

Is a provincial strategic framework for literacy in place, one based on good information?

School District's accountability process and recent revisions to the School Act

In 2002, the Ministry of Education created an accountability framework that consisted of school growth plans (developed by School Planning Councils), district accountability contracts, district reviews and Aboriginal enhancement agreements. In August 2006, the ministry initiated a review of all these elements.

Under recent changes to the School Act, district accountability contracts will be replaced with "achievement contracts." These new contracts will require school boards (now called Boards of Education) to set specific goals for student progress, including achieving specific results for Aboriginal students.

The revised Act will also make each Board of Education responsible for drafting a district literacy plan for its community. The plan is to be based on discussions held with major stakeholders involved in the local literacy arena – for example, post-secondary institutions and community literacy associations. These documents are to become instrumental in the development of future literacy efforts in each of British Columbia's communities.

The process by which school districts are reviewed will change as well. A risk-based approach rather than the current rotational approach will be used to select districts for inspections. That said, each district will undergo at least one District Performance Review every five years. The new process is expected to go into effect at the end of 2007.

Aboriginal education enhancement agreements will continue to exist under the new legislation. These are working agreements among a school district, all of its local Aboriginal communities and the Ministry of Education. They establish a collaborative partnership between Aboriginal communities and school districts, involving shared decision-making and specific goal-setting to meet the educational needs of Aboriginal students.

Recommendations

We recommend that the:

- **Ministry of Education:**
  - **provide appropriate support (e.g., guidance and resources) to the Boards of Education in the development of their literacy plans and reports; and**
  - **monitor implementation of the revised accountability framework and assess the effectiveness of the framework with respect to the focus on literacy.**

We recommend that the:

- **Boards of Education develop their literacy plans:**
  - **in the context of the provincial strategic framework; and**
  - **in consultation with key organizations within their local communities to determine needs and preferred strategies for addressing those needs.**

How effectively is government monitoring and reporting on its performance and progress in delivering literacy services?

To operate, manage and oversee literacy activities effectively, the key players promoting and delivering literacy services—government and various stakeholders—need reliable information on the expected and actual costs and effectiveness of their literacy programs and projects.

To assess how progress in achieving literacy is being monitored and reported, we looked for clear performance measures (both qualitative and quantitative) and definitions that are used consistently across the province and linked to goals and objectives. We also looked for annual public reporting on progress at three levels: province-wide, ministry and institutional (that is, at the school district and post-secondary institution level).

We concluded that improved monitoring and reporting are required at all levels. Although ministry-level reporting is being done, there is no province-wide reporting or a requirement for school districts to report back on the new community literacy plans they are introducing. We also found there is still a need to obtain more precise data and to develop better methods and measures for monitoring progress, especially for the populations being targeted for the strategic framework for literacy.

Current monitoring and performance reporting needs to be improved if progress is to be effectively tracked

Data and information needed to monitor progress

Good data is needed to monitor and report on progress effectively. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Advanced Education receive: basic enrolment information; student population characteristics (such as gender and self-identified Aboriginals); and completion information from school districts and post-secondary institutions. However, we did not find the data to be useful for monitoring the progress being made in improving literacy across the province.

The requirement for more precise information (for example, the number of students at risk per school district and post-secondary institution) needs to be better articulated if more useful information is to be collected and then aggregated and reported to stakeholders and the public.

How effectively is government monitoring and reporting on its performance and progress in delivering literacy services?

The need for more province-wide information is not new. For instance, the Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy suggested that a provincial research agenda on literacy include:

- mapping of all current literacy services and public investments;
- identifying gaps in services and investments;
- identifying those places where people "fall into the cracks"; and
- developing evidence-based, qualitative and quantitative benchmarks for measuring progress against the overall literacy action framework.

Province-wide reporting

The Premier's Advisory Panel also suggested creating a Premier's Literacy Council to:

- monitor progress against the Provincial Framework for Literacy; and
- draft an annual public report on the state of literacy in British Columbia and assess progress toward this provincial goal.

We agree that province-wide reporting by an independent body would be informative, although no such body or report has been created to date.

Ministry reporting

Currently, there is reporting at the ministry level. The Ministry of Education's Service Plan sets out the "cradle to grave" goals, objectives, strategies, performance measures and planned results (that is, targets) for literacy in the coming years, and its Annual Service Plan Report provides information on actual results. However, the performance measure for adult learners is limited to the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey which is carried out every 10 years or so. We believe that a more frequent measure of progress toward achieving adult literacy targets would provide the province with current and, therefore, more useful information.

How effectively is government monitoring and reporting on its performance and progress in delivering literacy services?

School district and post-secondary institution reporting

At the school districts and post-secondary institutions we visited, we found limited reporting on literacy. The accountability processes developed by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Advanced Education did not require reporting on literacy specifically.

Despite this, we noted one school district that was providing such a report. The Kamloops School District was the only one of those we visited that prepares a separate annual report showing the progress it is making toward achieving its goals related to literacy, numeracy, social responsibility and Aboriginal students. The report provides information with respect to goal achievement, examines areas that need support and helps refine the school board's vision over the long term. It also facilitates peer support and planning for the staff professional development efforts in the school district. This approach to accountability and improved transparency could be used as a reference by other school districts.

We also found that the recently revised School Act does not require any reporting back on the progress being made in implementing the community literacy plans, although it does require the Boards of Education to report annually on their progress in achieving the objectives outlined in the achievement contracts.

Recommendations

We recommend that:

- **the Ministry of Education ensure that monitoring and reporting at all levels—provincial, ministry and community—be aligned with evidence-based, qualitative and quantitative performance measures;**
- **the Boards of Education work with the key stakeholders within their communities to: 1) measure progress and adjust strategies as necessary to meet local needs; and 2) report annually on the progress they make within their communities in achieving the literacy objectives identified in the community literacy plans; and**
- **the government issue a province-wide annual public report on its progress in achieving its literacy goals and objectives.**

Ministry of Education Response to Literacy Audit Report

General Comments:

The Ministry of Education (the Ministry), in collaboration with the Ministry of Advanced Education, and participating School Districts and Colleges, is pleased to provide a formal response to the Office of the Auditor General's review entitled "Literacy: Creating the Conditions for Reading and Writing Success".

First, the Ministry and its partners would like to acknowledge OAG staff for their efforts to understand the complexities of improving literacy throughout the population. The literacy audit report is a positive, supportive and accurate reflection of some of the literacy challenges in British Columbia. Both ministries involved, along with participating School Districts and Colleges, commend OAG staff on their consultative approach to this work.

As the lead ministry accountable for literacy, the Ministry of Education is committed to continuing to work with partners both within government and at the district and community level to improve literacy outcomes for all learners. Coordination of literacy initiatives and services at the regional and community level is key and much progress has been made in this area.

The findings of the report endorse the direction of ReadNow BC, the provincial literacy plan, and the specific recommendations reinforce actions that have already been taken or are currently underway. The report also acknowledges the leadership and hard work shown by government in this important area. Since the audit concluded last spring, further progress has been made in several key areas also identified in the report. It should be noted that this audit did not include the full scope of the province's efforts including early learning, Aboriginal literacy and workplace literacy. Such efforts are interconnected and contribute to Government's comprehensive approach to meeting the literacy challenge in British Columbia.

The report highlights the need for improved data gathering, monitoring and reporting. The Ministry shares the OAG's interest in enhancing capacity in this area, and is currently working to develop a comprehensive provincial monitoring framework which will address this need. This framework will enable the Ministry and its partners to track the progress of literacy learners at all life stages.

Another key area identified in the report is the importance of increasing public awareness about the importance of literacy and life long learning. The Ministry supports the recommendations in this area and will continue

to work with its literacy partners to develop community-based campaigns that support and encourage British Columbians to improve their literacy skills and raise awareness about this important topic. British Columbia is also taking the lead on the literacy agenda at the pan-Canadian level through the Council of Ministers of Education. This includes an upcoming literacy forum to be held coast to coast to coast in April. The forum will result in an accessible and lasting legacy of literacy related materials aimed at sharing effective practice and providing additional tools and supports for literacy learners, practitioners and policy makers.

Literacy is not the challenge of any one group or government. It is a societal issue faced across the country and around the world. It requires focused attention at all levels—from families, communities, schools, districts, employers and governments. This report makes an important contribution in support of this ongoing priority and is a significant endorsement of the provincial literacy plan. Improving the literacy of British Columbians is a critical objective of government and we will continue to move forward with all our partners to achieve this important goal.

Specific Actions by Recommendation:

OAG Finding: Coordination has been challenging, but progress is being made

Recommendation 1:

We recommend that the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Advanced Education, Boards of Education and post-secondary institutions work together to develop ways of encouraging greater use of literacy services, such as through awareness campaigns on literacy and "one-window" approaches to delivering information on literacy at both the provincial and local levels.

Actions Taken To Date:

The Ministry of Advanced Education has developed an adult literacy strategy (Adult Opportunities Action Plan) which includes a number of strategies designed to raise public awareness of literacy programs and services offered in all sectors.

The Ministry of Advanced Education coordinated and delivered the Workplace Essential Skills conference that brought together more than 200 delegates in fall 2007 to learn more about the benefits of essential skills education and training in the workplace.

Ministry of Education Response to Literacy Audit Report

The Adult Opportunities Action Plan includes increased learner access to adult literacy and adult basic education programs through:

- *Implementation of tuition-free Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs in the public post-secondary system;*
- *Increased funding to the ABE Student Assistance Program;*
- *Development of Aboriginal adult literacy curriculum;*
- *Increased community-based Aboriginal adult literacy programming;*
- *Increased general community-based literacy programming;*
- *Increased community-based English-as-a-Second-Language programming;*
- *Establishing transition initiatives to support Aboriginal learners transition from developmental to post-secondary program.*

Ministries of Education and Advanced Education are working at the College Presidents/School District Superintendents level to enhance coordination of literacy programs across sectors; the alignment of data systems and performance measures is being planned.

The Ministry is working with key provincial and community partners to provide a one-stop portal for literacy information for learners. These include a 1-800-literacy phone line, a new ReadNow BC Website, and a literacy database of programs and services by community. The Public Affairs Bureau is working with all ministries involved to ensure an on-going awareness campaign on literacy is occurring throughout the year. This includes the annual Raise a Reader campaign, the annual Minister of Education's speakers tour in September, International Literacy Day events each September and Family Literacy Day events each January.

Actions Planned (Timeframe)

A communications plan is being developed to provide tools for communities to introduce local customized public awareness campaigns. The tool kit will be distributed in spring 2008.

British Columbia is taking the lead on the pan-Canadian literacy agenda through the Council of Ministers of Education. The next phase of the pan-Canadian literacy action plan will take place in April 2008 with the first ever Pan-Canadian Interactive Literacy Forum to be webcast simultaneously across the country.

Ministry of Education Response to Literacy Audit Report

A provincial pilot project with the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance is being developed to enhance access by income assistance clients to adult literacy and adult basic education programs. It is expected to begin in 2008/09.

OAG Finding: Strategic planning for literacy services lacks the support of adequate data and information

Recommendation 1:

We recommend that the Ministry of Education develop implementation plans that are supported by more comprehensive data and information on the needs of the populations it is targeting and on costing information for each of its strategies to improve literacy.

Actions Taken To Date:

A provincial monitoring framework has been developed and is being implemented. This framework will ensure that the data obtained is comprehensive and provides useful information on the key populations being targeted. Where gaps in data exist, work is being undertaken to ensure appropriate measures and tools are developed and used to ensure accurate information is collected on all ages and populations.

A comprehensive costing analysis is being conducted. This will verify investment to date and provide costing information necessary to support further implementation of the literacy programs and services under the four pillars of ReadNow BC.

Actions Planned (Timeframe)

A Pan-Canadian literacy data strategy is being proposed within the Council of Ministers of Education. If adopted, the process will begin this year.

The initial data from the provincial monitoring framework will be available January 2009.

Recommendation 2:

We recommend that the Ministry of Education:

- **Provide appropriate support (such as guidance and resources) to the Boards of Education in the development of their literacy plans and reports: and**

- **Monitor implementation of the revised accountability framework and assess the effectiveness of the framework with respect to the focus on literacy.**

That Boards of Education develop their literacy plans:

- **In the context of the provincial strategic framework; and**
- **In consultation with key organizations within their local communities to determine needs and preferred strategies for addressing those needs**

Actions Taken To Date:

The Ministry has designated a Superintendent of Literacy and Lifelong Learning to provide support to school districts and Boards of Education as they work with their communities to develop district literacy plans. The superintendent will also provide on-going support to school districts in improving literacy in the K-12 sector.

A series of regional district planning forums were held in fall 2007 across British Columbia to launch and create an understanding of the district literacy planning process.

Support is also being provided to communities and districts by two key provincial literacy organizations, Literacy Now and Literacy BC, as well as by staff in the Ministry of Education's Literacy Branch.

As part of the achievement contracts with Boards of Education, the monitoring recommendation has been addressed and is now a legislative requirement.

Actions Planned (Timeframe)

A provincial literacy planning forum is being held in January 2008. This forum will enable districts to share best practices in literacy planning and implementation. A district literacy planning handbook is being produced that will guide school districts and their communities through the literacy planning process.

The ministry is currently working with partners to review the infrastructure for coordinating and promoting literacy awareness at a regional level. The review will determine the best way of organizing and resourcing the recommended infrastructure model, so that services are coordinated and delivered as effectively as possible throughout the province. The review will be concluded by the end of February 2008.

with implementation to be initiated late spring 2008, pending available resources.

OAG Finding: Monitoring and performance reporting are currently insufficient to enable meaningful tracking and accounting of progress

Recommendation 1:

We recommend that:

- **the Ministry of Education ensure that monitoring and reporting at all levels—provincial, ministry and community—be aligned with evidence-based, qualitative and quantitative performance measures;**
- **the Boards of Education work with the key stakeholders within their communities to: 1) measure progress and adjust strategies as necessary to meet local needs; and 2) report annually on the progress they make within their communities in achieving the literacy objectives identified in the community literacy plans; and**
- **the government issue a province-wide annual public report on its progress in achieving its literacy goals and objectives.**

Actions Taken To Date:

A provincial monitoring framework has been developed and is being implemented. This framework will ensure that the data obtained is comprehensive and provides useful information on the key populations being targeted. The framework includes reporting at all levels and is aligned with evidence-based, qualitative and quantitative performance measures.

The recommendation to Boards of Education has been addressed and is a requirement of each Board of Education's annual district literacy plan.

The recommendation regarding an annual provincial report is worthy of consideration, however it should also be noted that both Boards of Education and the Ministry already issue a number of public reports, which provide a public accounting of this information. Boards of Education annually report on their Achievement Contracts, Superintendent Reports and District Literacy Plans. The Ministry issues its Service Plan report annually, which also reports out on literacy as one of the Ministry's key goals.

Actions Planned (Timeframe)

The Ministry agrees that in the past, monitoring and reporting has been ad-hoc. The Ministry is committed to providing the necessary leadership and moving forward responsibly on this priority. The provincial monitoring framework will provide a comprehensive tool. In addition, the ministry will continue to provide leadership and work collaboratively at the pan-Canadian level to ensure research and data are provided to enable responsible policy and program decisions at both the local and provincial levels.

As part of this approach, the Ministry will continue to work with key partners responsible for literacy and strengthen those relationships and their information sharing capacity. This includes partners responsible for adult education, English-as-a-Second-Language training, workplace literacy, and literacy for Aboriginal people.

Identification of literacy learning outcomes from all sectors providing adult literacy programming with the intent to articulate standards between service providers will continue through 2008/09. This will assist service providers by providing important points of reference for assessing learner progress and provide a framework for those designing, approving and reviewing literacy programs.

An assessment tool that can be used for placement, assessment, predicting future success, skill gain, program evaluation, credentialing, assessment development, and reporting is being developed through 2008/09.

Appendix A: Promising Practices

During the audit, we found some promising practices at the school districts and at one post-secondary education institution. They are summarized below:

School districts

Prince George School District—For the past few years, the Prince George School District has included in its accountability report a "Success for All" goal that reads: "Increase school completion rates of aboriginal and at risk students by improving transition rates [for] grades 6-12." The focus was put on social responsibility, parental involvement and Aboriginal students (an important and at risk component of Prince George's school population).

The superintendent considers his success factors for literacy to be:

- knowing how students learn;
- using a constructive approach to learning;
- finding the right balance between directed learning and the student's need for challenge;
- assessing the students' needs;
- assessing the students' progress towards the achievement of provincial goals (e.g., classroom assessments);
- preparing teachers to accommodate a variety of learning styles/rates;
- doing more for students before Grade 8 is reached; and
- trying to limit the number of students in a class.

The school district has been successful in providing information and activities related to literacy. For example, it has been:

- learning from focus groups held with students;
- developing guides to help teachers and principals assess and measure student achievement;
- implementing a variety of literacy data-driven action plans aimed at mitigating risks related to vulnerable students; and
- completing staff and administrator development guides—which include literacy—related to training and mentoring programs.

In the most recent accountability report it drafted, the school district also placed a strong focus on literacy.

Kamloops School District — This school district periodically updates its three-year district literacy plan. The plan's focus is currently on reading from kindergarten to Grade 2. The plan's emphasis is similar to that in the Prince George School District: focusing on promoting social responsibility and supporting Aboriginal students. Also, the district conducted a variety of data-driven literacy actions. Examples include conducting an assessment of the gender achievement gap for the district, offering year-round schooling, running video-conferencing tests and web casts for rural areas, offering a recreation and reading program during the summer months, and holding literacy-specific training sessions for its staff.

Vancouver School District — Literacy has been part of this school district's accountability report for years: "Goal 1 — All students will read and write with competence, confidence and enjoyment." Efforts are being taken at all Grade levels, with specific attention paid "to improve the literacy levels of the most vulnerable children." The school district also issues a very informative periodic literacy report that provides a summary and lessons learned of the district's various literacy projects. Separate project reports showing comparatives between planned and actual results are also being prepared for some literacy projects. These literacy and project reports help the district in its planning efforts for the upcoming school year.

Post-secondary institution

College of New Caledonia (Lakes Campus) — To better respond to local needs, the college included literacy among its goals. Its philosophy is to incorporate literacy training in all of its programs. Also, all literacy programs incorporate a component of "wrap–around support" (including transportation to classes, food, counselling, assistance with housing and health issues, access to bursaries, life skills training such as stress management, and child care). In addition, access to programs is enhanced by eliminating fees and providing programming in outlying communities, including on First Nations reserves.

Appendix A: Promising Practices

The Ministry's response included two practices believed to be promising for post-secondary institutions. We include this information here, but we did not audit it. .

Thompson Rivers University (TRU) — TRU's First Steps program provides a holistic approach to educational opportunity for young mothers. The program offers a continuum of curriculum from basic literacy to Adult Dogwood and includes the opportunity to access post secondary courses where appropriate. It is cohort based and includes daycare, family support, and parenting skills training. For young mothers waiting to get into the program, transition planning and support are also provided. First Steps is offered through strong partnership with community agencies, the Boys and Girls Club, Interior Community Society, Secwepmec Cultural Education Society and works cooperatively with School District 73.

Vancouver Community College — ABE Youth Program. This 60 student academic year program works with street youth referred by both the Broadway Youth Centre and numerous counsellors from several school districts in the greater Vancouver area. The program is located off campus at Broadway and Fraser and helps youth who have not completed their Grade 10 participate in a program that helps them achieve their intermediate level/Grade 10 in English, Math and Social Studies in an environment with their peers. Due to demand and waitlists the program has been expanded recently from 40 to 60 students and has extended its program to include some Grade 11 or Advanced programming. Recently awarded $30,000 in support from the Variety Club for computer equipment, this program is delivered in a setting where youth can access counselling, a breakfast club and help with finding accommodation through the Broadway Youth Centre.

Appendix B: Office of the Auditor General: 2007/08 reports issued to date

Report 1 — April 2007

Special Audit Report to the Speaker: The Financial Framework Supporting the Legislative Assembly

Report 2 — June 2007

The Child and Youth Mental Health Plan: A Promising Start to Meeting an Urgent Need

Report 3 — October 2007

A Review of the Vancouver Convention Centre Expansion Project: Governance and Risk Management

Report 4 — December 2007

Follow-up of 2004/2005 Report 3: Preventing and Managing Diabetes in British Columbia

Report 5 — January 2008

Preventing Fatalities and Serious Injuries in B.C. Forests: Progress Needed

Report 6 — February 2008

Literacy: Creating the Conditions for Reading and Writing Success

The above reports can be accessed through our website at http://www.bcauditor.com and can also be requested in print through our office.